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A ladies bicycle

Helle Bundgaard

It was bright red, the colour of *sindoor*, used by married women along the parting of their hair. I brought the bicycle from the capital to the village by train. Not that it was absolutely necessary. I could have taken a bus on my weekly visit to Puri, the pilgrimage centre situated on the Bay of Bengal. And when Seema, my research assistant and friend, and I wanted to talk to painters living in one of the neighbouring villages we always walked.

I guess it was partly the idea of freedom a cycle can provide, partly want of exercise, which made me spend almost 1000 rupees on the cycle. The weekly 12 kilometre cycle ride to Puri, certainly felt liberating after days of sitting, only interrupted by short walks between households and an occasional visit to a village nearby. Not to mention the rides around what was then a sleepy provincial town - on my own, with no one to tell me what to do and how.

The bicycle was a valuable asset, not as expensive as a cow of course, but just like the few cows belonging to some of the farmer families in the village, the bicycle had to be dragged up several stairs to be kept safe behind bolted doors at night. Soon it became second nature to bring the cycle onto the veranda and continue through the narrow passage leading to the courtyard and to the room which the master craftsman had reserved for Seema and me. The room already contained a big wooden bed and a small desk, leaving little space for us, never mind a cycle. So it was kept securely locked just outside our room, on the interior veranda surrounding the courtyard.

The cycle presented one of few opportunities to break with my position at the receiving end of social exchanges. Not a day went by without someone tracking me down to ask for the keys. Usually it was one of the apprentices from our household, Narayana, or the nephew of the master craftsman, Siva, when the household was in short supply of colours for example. Occasionally it was one of the other villagers in need of groceries or utensils available in the nearby small town. As the weeks went by, however, it was increasingly only Siva, who asked to borrow the cycle. He began wondering about my intentions and plans for the future, not only curious but also hopeful.

‘Who will have the cycle when you go back to America?’

‘I will not go to America; you know that I am not American’.

My answers were at best vague. Naively I thought he might leave the issue even if I did not make it clear that he was not a likely candidate. Although I did not realise it at the time, Siva gradually laid claims to the cycle. Siva, of course was not the only one who would like to have the cycle after my departure. But unlike the rest, his quest was explicit, gradually turning into what to me at the time appeared as an obsession. It was not that he really needed a cycle. More than I of course, but less than many other villagers. His household already had one bicycle. Of course it really belonged to Siva’s father’s brother, the master craftsman, who might offer his cycle when

requesting a boy to run an errand. But no one asked him to lend out his cycle, never. It was a favour to be granted.

Had the cycle been black, like the majority of bicycles at the time, it would not have been less desirable. Only a few men in the village owned bicycles and they were rarely left to rest. If not used by the owner, their male relatives or friends, for a visit to the local bazar, their young sons would practice the art of cycling. A tiny body resting against the top tube, one arm reaching across to the handlebar, a leg stuck through the frame to reach the pedal, and a trail of children in close pursuit, the boys eager for a turn on the cycle. Up the narrow lane running in front of the houses, around the *Baobab* and the old men playing *ganjapa* in the shade, and back again through the village and down towards the river.

The riverbank was our destination in the early afternoon just after lunch, when many villagers were having a rest. Otherwise a sanctuary of peace, it became our playground, a place to practice cycling. Narayana, Seema and I walked through the village, Seema pulling the cycle along. Narayana did offer to take it but Seema insisted towing it herself to get familiar with the feel of the bike before actually trying to ride it. Appearing as if she was familiar with cycles might increase her confidence in the project. Our procession down towards the river was of course noticed by the villagers who had skipped their afternoon rest in order to work on their verandas, carving or painting deities in various materials, and of course, chatting.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To the river’

‘At this time! What for and why are you not wearing a *sari*?’

‘We are going cycling ... It is fun’.

Seema responded laughingly to all the questions as we made our way through the village.

During the dry season, the riverbank is broad offering an ideal space to practice for someone who has never tried cycling before. Narayana had chosen well when he decided to bring us here. While I wrote up my research notes in the shade of a mango tree, Seema began her cycling lessons. Narayana guided her with patience, just like he guided all new apprentices in our household. ‘See what I do, first I put one foot on the right pedal then I put the other foot ... like this... see it is not difficult, you can do it too’. Passing the cycle to Seema, Narayana gave her an encouraging smile, ‘now it is your turn’. Seema tied up her *chunni* and tentatively placed herself in position to do as told. One foot on the right pedal, then the other.... She tried and failed, tried again and failed again, giggling all along. Just like Narayana guided a young apprentice the first time he had to draw a fish by sketching one and letting him draw on top of it till he got the feeling in his hand, Narayana briefly held the cycle steady allowing Seema to position herself before he let go. Seema did her best to keep her balance, first precariously but gradually with more confidence. ‘Helli see... see! I am cycling’. ‘Excellent!’ I said, as she lost her balance and fell over on the soft sandy surface. Narayana quickly came to her rescue, Seema rearranged her clothes and soon she was back on the cycle, as keen to learn as any apprentice I have seen. By the time we returned to the village to continue our work, Seema had had enough of cycling for the day and she gladly let Narayana bring the cycle back to its place within the house.

It was an unusually hot day for December and quiet. In the *office* the apprentices were at work, some in deeper concentration than others. A scraping sound from Rama's small slanting desk when he shifted his position, otherwise nothing. Narayana was sitting across from the younger apprentices working on the ten *avatars*, an approaching deadline reflected in his efficient strokes with his brush. Due to the size of the painting he had to sit on top of the image while working, his slim body folded double. Only a thin piece of material was between his bottom and *Vishnu* in his various forms. Not that this bothered Narayana, he did what he had to do in order to paint the image and thus commemorate the deity. Occasionally he got up to stretch and to check on the progress of the boys.

Rama was drawing on a blackboard the size of a large handkerchief. 'What is that supposed to be? A swan?' Narayana asked echoing their guru but with a twinkle in his eyes. Rama grinned foolishly and began afresh having been in the *guru kula ashrama* long enough to appreciate the advice of an older apprentice. Returning his attention to his own painting, Narayana adjusted his shawl, sat down and got on with his work. An hour must have passed by, when Siva entered the room from the inner courtyard where he had parked the bicycle. Returning from an errand in the bazar or Puri perhaps, his orange and brown chequered lungi was supplemented by a smart, white terrylene shirt. The boys shifted uneasily behind their desks, Rama glancing sideways to see where Siva went. Siva, however, did not notice the sudden tension in the room, or he did not care. He clearly had other things on his mind. 'The keys' he said tossing them across to me before he went out again this time through the entrance leading to the lane. With his exit the atmosphere shifted again, fidgety bodies, occasional whispers.

It was in relation to *business* that the cycle proved most useful to the household. In the morning and afternoon during the winter months, when tourists were most likely to pay the village a visit, one of the youngest apprentices was chosen to keep an eye out for customers. The boy would be on duty in the nearby town, more precisely in the spot where an unpaved road leads from the town to the village. The minute he saw some tourists approaching, he would run as fast as his short legs could carry him to inform his household. Whenever an apprentice came sprinting into the *office*, Siva would find me to get the keys and ride off to be the first to meet the tourists. No wonder that his requests for a long term agreement gradually turned into pleading. Perhaps by then, two months after my arrival, he had realised that the chances of getting his wish fulfilled were slim. 'I really need the cycle in order to help my father ... who has helped you so much...' I still did not have the nerve to turn down his request, only repeating my vague 'We will see, I do not know'. Even I felt exasperated listening to myself, but I could not inform Siva about my plans. I am not sure why, perhaps a sixth sense told me it would be premature and unwise.

Having got the keys Siva would race up towards the main road but got off the cycle in time to catch his breath before approaching the tourists. 'Hello, you want *patta chitra*?' Not waiting for a reply he continued: 'I am son [nephew] of the national awardee, come with me'. He would then lead the tourists directly to our household passing other craftsmen and their exhibited wares on the way. Few would openly protest but never-the-less try their best to attract the attention of the guests preferably before their visit to the master craftsman and if that failed then after. Of course by the time they left the master craftsman, they might already have spent their money. After all he had the biggest display always making sure to have a large stock to cater for even large groups of tourists. The majority of tourists had no clue anyway; they were unlikely to

notice that some of the paintings were produced by painters from other households. Some visitors could not even see the difference between the work of an apprentice and a highly skilled craftsman. If they decided to buy from the master craftsman they were unlikely to want more paintings on their way out of the village.

The cycle came in handy not only for business purposes but also the day I decided to give a feast. It was my birthday and although only the birthdays of deities and young children are celebrated in the village, I decided it was a good opportunity to give something back to the household. I asked Narayana and Siva for culinary advice. 'We will eat chicken', Siva said savouring the word 'chicken', his large, brown eyes sparkling. Narayana kept quiet but licked his lips as if he had already eaten the bird. After two months of thin dahl occasionally accompanied by a few miniscule river fish, I felt my mouth watering, what a splendid idea. 'How many will we need and where will we get them?' 'Three' the answer came prompt and had the ring of a first round of haggling, a skill Siva mastered to perfection when dealing with the foreign customers who came to the household to buy paintings. Siva looked expectantly at me, Narayana looked at him and recoiled, perhaps he felt Siva was asking too much. With sixteen people in the household, however, I did not think three of the usually scrawny chickens was an unreasonable request. It was Siva who biked to the market returning with the squeaking birds, tied up and dangling from the handlebar. It was also Siva who organised the slaughter on the earthen veranda behind the house. For weeks after, dark marks from the trails of blood competed with the white decorative patterns, *chitta*. The latter had been made during the auspicious period, when farmers bring the harvest home and women decorate their houses in honour of the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. The stark contrast struck me whenever I returned from the latrine placed outside at the back of the house. A silent reminder of Siva's never-lacking initiative when it came to tasks giving him an excuse for a break from the hard work of increasing his painting skills.

Yet another deadline. Even Siva had been painting for hours at a stretch. Last night the master craftsman, Siva and Narayana had worked till midnight with only a slight interruption when the power failed and the kerosene lamps were brought in. Narayana had dark circles under his eyes, Siva was in a foul mood, oozing out of every pore and affecting everybody in the *office*. The young apprentices knew better than to attract attention and for once appeared as one common body of hard working students. As if he could read their minds he got up to inspect their work one after the other. As he moved down the line of students their bodies appeared to shrink when he approached to expand again to their normal size only after he had passed. Some, however, were not so lucky. The blows fell quickly, their sound briefly interrupting the eerily quiet room. Having paraded the room, Siva sat down to paint but found that some of his coco nut colour containers were almost empty. He got up again, unlocked the cupboard and rummaged around without finding what he was looking for. We all waited, for what I am not sure, hardly breathing. Siva suddenly turned to me: 'Give me the keys, we need colours'. For once it did not take me long to produce the keys.

As Siva's errands to the market on the bicycle became still more frequent, his former pretences gradually vanished 'You give the cycle to me when you leave, I need it'. Why did I not simply inform him that, by then, I had decided to give the cycle to Seema? During our stay in the village, we had developed a close friendship. When having a break from fieldwork, I would occasionally stay a weekend in Seema's home situated in a village outside the capital. We spent

hours on one of the big family beds, chatting about our experiences amongst painters and our hopes for the future. Seema wanted to work also after marriage, something that was easier said than done in Orissa at the time, when most families expected a daughter-in-law to stay at home. I had faith in Seema, however. When she put her mind to something, she usually succeeded as evident from the day she finally cycled at the riverside all on her own.

If nothing else the cycle would shorten the time she used commuting between her village and the university, instead of walking to the bus stand, she could cycle. Giving the cycle to Seema appeared to be the right thing to do. A small gesture to women's lib with the added benefit of not having to favour one of the painters.

Surely, I could have explained this to Siva but instead I kept quiet. Was it guilt? Guilt caused by my eternal debt to the master craftsman who let me stay in his household? Or by the precarious inequality of this world which makes it possible for someone like me – even as a student – to buy a cycle on a whim while others can only dream, argue, or try their luck to get what could make a real, positive difference in their lives?

It was not only his way of speaking which changed. During our daily ongoing conversations with the villagers, Siva suddenly appeared in the doorway requesting the keys. I found the interruptions irritating and problematic because he might overhear a remark not meant for his ears, such as the common complaints about the unfair competition which affected village life. Because I wished him gone I did not hesitate to let him have the cycle but simply handed him the keys despite his increasingly hard treatment of the bike. I was not the only one who noticed the damage caused by Siva's use. 'What is he doing to make it look like this, I wonder? Yesterday the front wheel did not shake like this'. Seema was puzzled, when she noticed the difference during one of our practice sessions. This was not just daily wear and tear. There was something else at stake. Narayana looked at her: 'He wants the cycle'. 'But why destroy it?' I asked, as puzzled as Seema.

A week before departure Seema warned me to be careful. 'Remember to latch our room, do not leave your belongings unattended'. 'Who would take our things?' Seema looked at me 'Never mind, just be careful, everybody here knows we are leaving'. I was not entirely convinced, but I had worked closely with Seema long enough to listen carefully to any advice of hers and consequently I did my best to limit my tendency to be scatty with my belongings. Apart from the cycle, everything else was locked up securely in our room.

The day before we left, Siva took the bicycle 'to go to the market'. He did not come home before dark, as he usually did. It got late and we finally decided to call it a day. Where was he? And where was the bicycle? When we got up next morning, the cycle was back at its place outside our room. Still no sign of Siva. Odd really, he knew we were leaving. We packed our belongings and said our farewells, but he did not come. Perhaps he felt he had said all that was needed. Seema stood in the lane in front of the house with our bags and bedding while I went to get the cycle. That was when I saw it. The clear-cut gash across the leather saddle grinning good bye. It was time to go.

Summary:

The story *A ladies bicycle* concerns ethical dilemmas related to unintended consequences of fieldwork. The setting in a small Indian village works as a prism that offers an opportunity to reflect upon our practice as anthropologists. One of the challenges of fieldwork in a relatively

poor setting is that objects, which to the anthropologist are simply a matter of convenience, represent resources otherwise out of reach and might lead to competition amongst interlocutors and power struggles. The cycle thus articulates the unequal relation between anthropologist and interlocutors.

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